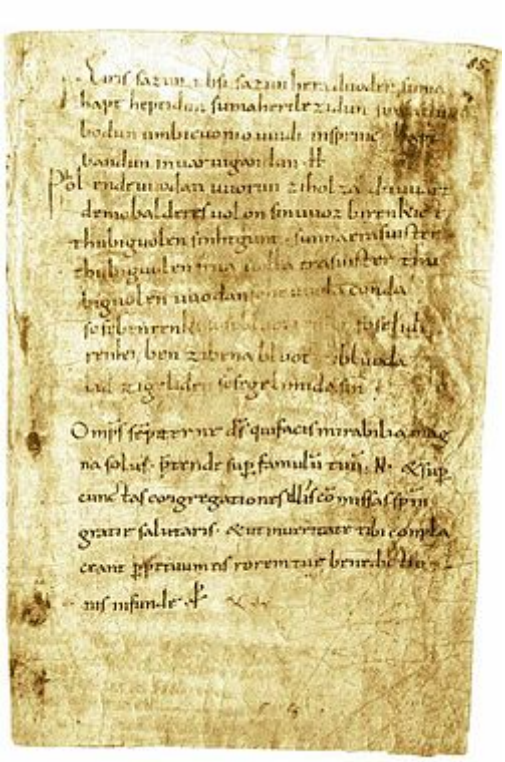
Merseburg charms

The **Merseburg charms** or **Merseburg incantations** (German: *die Merseburger Zaubersprüche*) are two medieval magic spells, charms or incantations, written in Old High German. They are the only known examples of Germanic pagan belief preserved in the language. They were discovered in 1841 by Georg Waitz,[1] who found them in a theological manuscript from Fulda, written in the 9th or 10th century,[2] although there remains some speculation about the date of the charms themselves. The manuscript (Cod. 136 f. 85a) is stored in the library of the cathedral chapter of Merseburg, hence the name.



Merseburg Incantations manuscript
(Merseburger Domstiftsbibliothek, Codex 136, f. 85r, 10th Cy.)

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History

The Merseburg Incantations are the only known surviving instance of ostensibly pre-Christian, pagan, Old High German literature.[3][4]

The incantations were recorded in the 10th century by a cleric, possibly in the abbey of Fulda, on a blank page of a liturgical book, which later passed to the library at Merseburg. The incantations have thus been transmitted in Caroline minuscule on the flyleaf of a Latin sacramentary.

The spells became famous in modern times through the appreciation of the Grimm brothers, who wrote as follows:

> Lying between Leipzig, Halle and Jena, the extensive library of the Cathedral Chapter of Merseburg has often been visited and made use of by scholars. All have passed over a codex which, if they chanced to take it up, appeared to offer only well-known church items, but which now, valued according to its entire

> content, offers a treasure such that the most famous libraries have nothing to compare with it...

The spells were published later by the Brothers Grimm in *On two newly-discovered poems from the German Heroic Period* (1842).

The manuscript of the Merseburg Incantations was on display until November 2004 as part of the exhibition "Between Cathedral and World - 1000 years of the Chapter of Merseburg," at Merseburg cathedral. They were previously exhibited in 1939.

The texts

Each charm is divided into two parts: a preamble telling the story of a mythological event; and the actual spell in the form of a magic analogy (*just as it was before... so shall it also be now...*). In their verse form, the spells are of a transitional type; the lines show not only traditional alliteration but also the end-rhymes introduced in the Christian verse of the 9th century.

First Merseburg Charm

The first spell is a "Lösesegen" (blessing of release), describing how a number of "Idisen"[2] freed from their shackles warriors caught during battle. The last two lines contain the magic words "Leap forth from the fetters, escape from the foes" that are intended to release the warriors.

"Idise" (1905) by Emil Doepler.

Eiris sazun idisi,	Once sat
sazun hera duoder;	women,
suma hapt	They sat
heptidun, suma	here,
heri lezidun,	then
suma clubodun	there.
umbi	Some
cuoniouuidi:	fastened
insprinc	bonds,
haptbandun,	Some
inuar	impeded
uigandun.[5]	an army,
	Some
	unraveled
	fetters:
	Escape
	the
	bonds,
	flee the
	enemy![1]

Second Merseburg Charm

Phol is with Wodan when Baldur's horse dislocates its foot while riding through the forest (*holza*). Wodan intones the incantation: "Bone to bone, blood to blood, limb to limb, as if they were mended".

Figures that can be clearly identified within Continental Germanic mythology are "Uuôdan" (Wodan) and "Frîia" (Frija). Depictions found on Migration Period Germanic bracteates are often viewed as Wodan (Odin) healing a horse.[6]

Comparing Norse mythology, Wodan is well-attested as the cognate of Odin. Frija the cognate of Frigg,[6] also identified with Freyja.[7] *Balder* is Norse Baldr. Phol is the masculine form of *Uolla*, but the context makes clear that it is another name of Balder.[2] *Uolla* has been linked to Fulla, a minor goddess and a handmaid of Frigg.[6] Sunna (the sun) in Norse mythology is Sól, though her sister Sinthgunt is otherwise unattested.[8]

"Wodan Heals Balder's Horse" (1905) by Emil Doepler.

Phol ende uuodan uuorun zi holza.	Phol and Wodan were riding to the woods,
du uuart demo balderes uolon sin uuoz birenkit.	and the foot of Balder's foal was sprained
thu biguol en sinthgunt, sunna era suister;	So Sinthgunt, Sunna's sister, conjured it.
thu biguol en friia, uolla era suister;	and Frija, Volla's sister, conjured it.
thu biguol en uuodan, so he uuola conda:	and Wodan conjured it, as well he could:
sose benrenki, sose bluotrenki, sose lidirenki:	Like bone-sprain, so blood-sprain, so joint-sprain:
ben zi bena, bluot si bluoda, lid zi geliden, sose gelimida sin![9]	Bone to bone, blood to blood, joints to joints, so may they be mended.[10]

Parallels

The First Merseburg Charm (loosening charm)'s similarity to the anecdote in Bede's *Hist. Eccles.*, IV, 22 (""How a certain captive's chains fell off when masses were sung for him".) has been noted by Jacob Grimm.[11] In this Christianized example, it is the singing of the mass, rather than the chanting of the charm, that effects the release of a comrade (in this case a brother). The unshackled man is asked "whether he had any spells about him, as are spoken of in fabulous stories",[12] which curiously has been translated as "loosening rune (about him)" (Old English: *álýsendlícan rune*) in the Anglo-Saxon translation of Bede, as has been pointed out by Sophus Bugge. Bugge makes this reference in his edition of the Eddaic poem *Grógaldr* (1867), in an attempt to justify

his emending the phrase "Leifnir's fire (?)" (Old Norse: *leifnis elda*) into "loosening charm" (Old Norse: *leysigaldr*) in the context of one of the magic charms that Gróa is teaching to her son.[13] But this is an aggressive emendation of the original text, and its validity as well as any suggestion to its ties to the Merseburg charm is subject to skepticism.[14][n 1]

Many analogous magic incantations to the Second Merseburg Charm (horse-healing spell), have been noted. Some paralleling is discernible in other Old German spells, but analogues are particularly abundant in folkloric spells from Scandinavian countries (often preserved in so-called "black books".). Similar charms have been noted in Gaelic, Lettish and Finnish suggesting that the formula is of ancient Indo-European origin.Some commentators trace the connection back to writings in ancient India.

Other Old German spells

Other spells recorded in Old High German or Old Saxon/Old Low German noted for similarity, such as the group of *wurmsegen* spells for casting out the "Nesso" worm causing the affliction.[15] There are several manuscript recensions of this spell, and Jacob Grimm scrutinizes in particular the so-called "Contra vermes" variant,[16] in Low German[17] from the Cod. Vidob. theol. 259[15] (now ÖNB Cod. 751[18]) The text is a mixture of Latin and German:

> **Contra vermes** (against worms[17])
>
> Gang ût, nesso, mit nigun nessiklînon,
> ût fana themo marge an that bên, fan themo bêne an that flêsg,
> ût fana themo flêsgke an thia hûd, ût fan thera hûd an thesa strâla.
> Drohtin, uuerthe so![16]

As Grimm explains, the spell tells the *nesso* worm and its nine young ones to begone, away from the marrow to bone, bone to flesh, flesh to hide (skin), and into the *strâla* or arrow, which is the implement into which the pest or pathogen is to be coaxed.[15] It closes with the invocation: "Lord (*Drohtin*), let it be".[17] Grimm insists that this charm, like the *De hoc quod Spurihalz dicunt* charm (MHG: *spurhalz*; German: *lahm* "lame") that immediately precedes it in the manuscript, is "about lame horses again." And the "transitions from marrow to bone (or sinews), to flesh and hide, resemble phrases in the sprain-spells," i.e. the Merseburg horse-charm types.

Scandinavia

Jacob Grimm in his *Deutsche Mythologie*, chapter 38, listed examples of what he saw as survivals of the Merseburg charm in popular traditions of his time: from Norway a prayer to Jesus for a horse's leg injury, and two spells from Sweden, one invoking Odin (for a horse suffering from a fit or equine distemper[19][n 2]) and another invoking Frygg for a sheep's ailment.[15] He also quoted one Dutch charm for fixing a horse's foot, and a Scottish one for the treatment of human sprains that was still practiced in his time in the 19th century (See #Scotland below).

Norway

Grimm provided in his appendix another Norwegian horse spell,[15] which has been translated and examined as a parallel by Thorpe.[19] Grimm had recopied the spell from a tome by Hans Hammond, *Nordiska Missions-historie* (Copenhagen 1787), pp. 119–120, the spell being transcribed by Thomas von Westen c. 1714.[20] This appears to be the same spell in English as given as a parallel by a modern commentator, though he apparently misattributes it to the 19th century.[9] The texts and translations will be presented side-by-side below:

LII. gegen knochenbruch [21]	---	For a Broken Bone
	Jesus rode to the heath,	Jesus himself rode to the heath,

Jesus reed sig til Heede, der reed han syndt sit Folebeen. Jesus stigede af og lägte det; Jesus lagde Marv i Marv, Ben i Ben, Kjöd i Kjöd ; Jesus lagde derpaa et Blad, At det skulde blive i samme stad. i tre navne etc. (Hans Hammond, "Nordiska Missions-historie", Kjøbenhavn 1787, pp.119, 120) [22] (= Bang's formula #6)[23]	There he rode the leg of his colt in two. Jesus dismounted and heal'd it ; Jesus laid marrow to marrow, Bone to bone, flesh to flesh ; Jesus laid thereon a leaf, That it might remain in the same place. [19] (Thorpe tr.)	And as he rode, his horse's bone was broken. Jesus dismounted and healed that: Jesus laid marrow to marrow, Bone to bone, flesh to flesh. Jesus thereafter laid a leaf So that these should stay in their place.[9][n 3] (in the Three Names, etc.) (Stone(?) tr.)

The number of Norwegian analogues is quite large, though many are just variations on the theme. Bishop Anton Christian Bang compiled a volume culled from Norwegian black books of charms and other sources, and classified the horse-mending spells under the opening chapter "Odin og Folebenet", strongly suggesting a relationship with the second Merseburg incantation.[24] Bang here gives a group of 34 spells, mostly recorded in the 18th–19th century though two are assigned to the 17th (c. 1668 and 1670),[20] and 31 of the charms[25] are for treating horses with an injured leg. The name for the horse's trauma, which occurs in the titles, is Norwegian: *vred* in most of the rhymes, with smatterings of *raina* and *bridge* (*sic.*), but they all are essentially synonymous with *brigde*, glossed as the "dislocation of the limb"[n 4] in Aasen's dictionary.[25][26]

From Bishop Bang's collection, the following is a list of specific formulas discussed as parallels in scholarly literature:

- No. 2, "Jesus og St. Peter over Bjergene red.." (c. 1668. From Lister og Mandal Amt, or the modern-day Vest-Agder. Ms. preserved at the Danish Rigsarkivet)[27]
- No. 6, Jesus red sig tile Hede.." (c. 1714. Veø, Romsdal). Same as Grimm's LII quoted above.[28][29]
- No, 20, "Jeus rei sin Faale over en Bru.." (c. 1830 Skåbu, Oppland. However Wadstein's paper does not focus the study on the base text version, but the variant Ms. B which has the "Faale" spelling)[30]
- No. 22, "Vor Herre rei.." (c. 1847. Valle, Sætersdal. Recorded by Jørgen Moe)[31][n 5]

It might be pointed out that none of the charms in Bang's chapter "Odin og Folebenet" actually invokes Odin.[n 6] The idea that the charms have been Christianized and that the presence of Baldur has been substituted by "The Lord" or Jesus is expressed by Bang in another treatise,[32] crediting communications with Bugge and the work of Grimm in the matter. Jacob Grimm had already pointed out the Christ-Balder identification in interpreting the Merseburg charm; Grimm seized on the idea that in the Norse language, "White Christ (*hvíta Kristr*)" was a common epithet, just as Balder was known as the "white Æsir-god" [33]

Another strikingly similar "horse cure" incantation is a 20th-century sample that hails the name of the ancient 11th-century Norwegian king Olaf II of Norway. The specimen was collected in Møre, Norway, where it was presented as for use in healing a bone fracture:

Les denne bøna:	To Heal a Bone Fracture
Sankt-Olav reid i den grøne skog,	Saint Olav rode in green wood;

fekk skade på sin eigen hestefot. Bein i bein, kjøt i kjøt, hud i hud. Alt med Guds ord og amen[34]	broke his little horse's foot. Bone to bone, flesh to flesh, skin to skin. In the name of God, amen.[35]

Sweden

Several Swedish analogues were given by Sophus Bugge and by Viktor Rydberg in writings published around the same time (1889). The following 17th-century spell was noted as a parallel to the Merseburg horse charm by both of them.[36][37]

"Mot vred" (Sörbygdens dombok, 1672)	"Against dislocations" (court proceeding records for Sörbygden hundred, 1672)
Vår herre Jesus Kristus och S. Peder de gingo eller rede öfver Brattebro. S. Peders häst fick vre eller skre. Vår herre steg af sin häst med, signa S. Peders häst vre eller skre: blod vid blod, led vid led. Så fick S. Peders häst bot i 3 name o.s.v.	Our Lord Jesus Christ and St. Peter went or rode over Brattebro. St. Peter's horse got (a dislocation or sprain). Our Lord dismounted from His horse, blessed St. Peter's horse (with the dislocation or sprain): blood to blood, (joint to joint). So received St. Peter's horse healing in three names etc. etc.
—Bugge and Rydberg, after Arcadius (1883)[38]	—adapted from Eng. tr. in: Nicolson 1892, *Myth and Religion*, p.120- and Brenner's German tr of Bugge (1889)[n 7]

Another example (from Kungelf's Dombok, 1629) was originally printed by Arcadius.[39][40]

"Vår herre red ad hallen ned. Hans foles fod vrednede ved, han stig aff, lagde leed ved leed, blod ved blod, kiöd ved kiöd, ben ved ben, som vor herre signet folen sin, leedt ind igjen, i naffn, o.s.v."	"Our Lord rode down to the hall. His foal's foot became sprained, he dismounted, laid joint with joint, blood with blood, sinew with sinew, bone with bone, as our Lord blessed his foal, led in again, in the name of, etc."
Rydberg, after Arcadius, (1883) ?[40]	

A spell beginning "S(anc)te Pär och wår Herre de wandrade på en wäg (from Sunnerbo hundred, Småland 1746) was given originally by Johan Nordlander.[41]

A very salient example, though contemporary to Bugge's time, is one that invokes Odin's name.[42]

A Sign of the Cross incantation (Danish: *signeformularer*)
(from Jellundtofte socken, Västbo hundred in Småland, 19th century)

Oden rider öfver sten och bärg	"Odin rides over rock and hill; he rides his horse out of a sprain and into joint

han rider sin häst ur vred och i led, ur olag och i lag, ben till ben, led till led, som det bäst var, när det helt var.	out of disorder and into order, bone to bone, joint to joint, as it was best, when it was whole."

—recorded by Artur Hazelius
communicated to Bugge [37]

Denmark

A Danish parallel noted by A. Kuhn:[43] is the following:

Imod Forvridning (Jylland)	against dislocations (from Jutland)
Jesus op ad Bierget red;	Jesus up the mountain did ride;
der vred han sin Fod af Led.	sprained his foot in the joint.
Saa satte han sig ned at signe.	He sat down for a blessing,
Saa sagde han:	and so said he:
Jeg signer Sener i Sener,	I bless tendon to tendon
Aarer i Aarer,	vein to vein,
Kiød i Kiød,	flesh to flesh,
Og Blod i Blod!	and blood to blood!
Saa satte han Haanden til Jorden ned,	So he set his hand down on the ground below,
Saa lægedes hans Fodeled!	and bonded were his joints together!
I Navnet o.s.v.	In the Name, etc.[n 8]

Thiele's #530[44]

Scotland

Grimm also exemplified a Scottish charm (for people, not horses) as a salient remnant of the Merseburg type of charm.[15] This healing spell for humans was practiced in the Shetlands[45][46] (which has strong Scandinavian ties and where the Norn language used to be spoken). The practice involved tying a "wresting thread" of black wool with nine knots around the sprained leg of a person, and in an inaudible voice pronouncing the following:

> The Lord rade and the foal slade;
> he lighted and he righted,
> set joint to joint,
> bone to bone,
> and sinew to sinew
> Heal in the Holy Ghost's name!'[15][45][46]

Alexander Macbain (who also supplies a presumably reconstructed Gaelic "Chaidh Criosd a mach/Air maduinn mhoich" to the first couplet of "The Lord rade" charm above[47]) also records a version of a horse spell which was chanted while "at the same time tying a worsted thread on the injured limb.[48]

Chaidh Criosda mach	Christ went forth
Sa' mhaduinn moich	In the early morn
'S fhuair e casan nan each,	And found the horses' legs

Air am bristeadh mu seach.	Broken across.
Chuir e enaimh ri enaimh,	He put bone to bone.
Agus feith ri feith,	Sinew to sinew,
Agus feòil ri feòil,	Flesh to flesh.
Agus craicionn ri craicionn,	And skin to skin ;
'S mar leighis esan sin	And as He healed that,
Gu'n leighis mise so![48]	May I heal this.
(a version of the *Eolas* from Lochbroom)[49]	(Macbain tr.) [50]

Macbain goes on to quote another Gaelic horse spell, one beginning "Chaidh Brìde mach.." from *Cuairtear nan Gleann* (July, 1842) that invokes St. Bride as a "he" rather than "she", plus additional examples suffering from corrupted text.

Ancient India

There have been repeated suggestions that healing formula of the Second Merseburg Charm may well have deep Indo-European roots. A parallel has been drawn between this charm and an example in Vedic literature, an incantation from the 2nd millennium BCE found in the *Atharvaveda*, hymn IV, 12:[51][52][53][54]

1. róhaṇy asi róhany asthṇaç chinnásya róhaṇî róháye 'dám arundhati 2. yát te rishṭáṃ yát te dyuttám ásti péshṭraṃ te âtmáni dhâtấ tád bhadráyâ púnaḥ sáṃ dadhat párushâ páruḥ 3. sáṃ te majjấ majjñấ bhavatu sámu te párushâ páruḥ sáṃ te mâmsásya vísrastaṃ sáṃ ásthy ápi rohatu 4. majjấ majjñấ sáṃ dhîyatâṃ cármaṇâ cárma rohatu ásṛk te ásthi rohatu ṃâṇsáṃ mâṇséna rohatu 5. lóma lómnâ sáṃ kalpayâ tvacấ sáṃ kalpayâ tvácam ásṛk te ásthi rohatu chinnáṃ sáṃ dhehy oshadhe[51]	1. Grower (Rohani)[n 9] art thou, grower, grower of severed bone; make this grow O *arundhatī*[n 10] 2. What of thee is torn, what of thee is inflamed (?), what of thee is crushed (?) in thyself may Dhātar[n 11] excellently put that together again, joint with joint. 3. Let thy marrow come together with marrow, and thy joint together with joint; together let what of your flesh has fallen apart, together let thy bone grow over. 4. Let marrow be put together with marrow; let skin grow with skin; let thy blood, bone grow; let flesh grow with flesh. 5. Fit thou together hair with hair; fit together skin with skin; let thy blood, bone grow; put together what is severed, O herb..., etc.[55]

However, the Rohani (Rōhaṇī Sanskrit: रोहणी) here apparently does not signify a deity, but rather a healing herb;[56] in fact, just an alternate name for the herb arundathi mentioned in the same strain.[57]

See also

- Eggja stone
- *Lorsch Bee Blessing*
- *Nine Herbs Charm*

Notes

1. In the original text of *Grógaldr*, the text that Bugge emended to *leysigaldr* actually reads *leifnis eldr". This is discussed by Rydberg as "Leifner's or Leifin's fire", and connected by him to Dietrich von Bern's fire-breath that can release the heroes from their chains (Rydobrg, Viktor (1907). (https://books.google.com/books?id=cqeLSMiYVD4C&pg=PA61)*Teutonic mythology (https://books.google.com/books?id=cqeLSMiYVD4C&pg=PA61)*. **1**. Rasmus Björn Anderson (translator. S. Sonnenschein & Co.p. 61.).*
2. Fortunately (Thorpe 1851, pp. 23–4, vol.1) provides an English translation side by side with the Swedish charm, and clarifies that the condition, in Swedish *floget* or the 'flog' is "horse distemper". Grimm says it corresponds to German: *anflug* or a "fit" in English, but it is hard to find any sources precisely defining this.
3. Griffiths only vaguely identifies this as a "Norwegian charm, written down in the 19th century", citing (Stanley 1975, p. 84) and (Stone 1993). The century dating conflicts with Grimm and Bang's attribution.
4. *brigde* Danish: *Forvridning af Lemmer* (dislocation of the limbs)
5. No. 7 and a text similar to No. 21 are used as parallels in the Norwegian Wikipedia article, no:Merseburgerformelen
6. although a couple of charms (No. 40, No. 127) amongst some 1550 in Bang's volume do name the pagan god)
7. Nicolson gives "St. Peter's horse got *vre eller skre* the italics he footnotes as meaning "mishandled or slipped". He also translated *led vid led* as "sinew to sinew", but Brenner has *Glied* (joint)
8. Wikiuser translated
9. Skr. Rohani (Sanskrit: रोहणी) "grower", another name for the medicine plant arundhati mentioned in this strophe. (Lincoln 1986, p. 104)
10. Here a climbing vine; cf. Arundhati
11. the Creator

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7. Jeep's translation gives "Freya". Benjamin Thorpe (Northern Mythology, 1851, p. 23) actually read the manuscript as having *Frua* rather than *Friia*, *Frua* being the cognate of Norse Freyja.
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9. (Griffiths 2003, p. 174)
10. translation from Benjamin W Fortson, *Indo-European language and culture: an introduction*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, ISBN 978-1-4051-0316-9, p. 325.
11. (Grimm 1884, p. 1231, volume 3 (English))
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14. Murdoch, Brian (1988). "But Did They Work? Interpreting the Old High German Merseburg Charms in their Medieval Context" (https://books.google.com/books?id=AShZAAAAMAAJ) *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* **89**: 358–369., p.365, footnote. Quote: "The existence of the term "leysigaldr" in Old Norse is seductive, but does not constitute proof of the existence of these outside the realm of fiction, or that it can be applied to the Merseburg charm. "

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20. (Bang & 1901–2, chapter 1, Spell #4)
21. Numeral and German title is Grimm's
22. (Grimm 1888, pp. 1867–8, vol. 4), Appendix, Spells, Spell #LVII. Title is Grimm's
23. (Bang & 1901–2, p. 4),
24. Bang's *Norse hexeformulaer* collection lacks commentary but (Bang 1884) makes clear he subscribes to the parallelism view espoused by Grimm and Bugge.
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27. (Masser 1972, pp. 19–20)
28. (Grimm 1844), repr. (Grimm 1865, pp. 1–29, vol.2)
29. Grimm#LVII and Bang's no.4 have spelling differences, but both cite Hammond as source, and the identity is mentioned in (Bang 1884, p. 170)
30. (Wadstein 1939)
31. (Bang 1884, p. 170)
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